

## Conference topics

*Aspects of improving the artist's "own" awareness of his/her own practice and the knowledge it incorporates;*

*Aspects of insight, understanding and knowing in the work;*

*Discussion of the processes of making the work/design/music in the context of own and other practices;*

*Discovery/definition of values in the process of designing/making/doing/performing;*

*Implications of uncovering the aspects considered as tacit;*

*Exploration of the tension between the understanding and emotional experience of the work of art or design;*

*Forms and frames relevant to represent knowledge based on creative practice;*

*Investigation of the relation between the creative work and its description – interpretation – explanation;*

*Inwards and outwards communication in designing/music/arts.*

## >> PERFORMING >> KNOWING >>

*Relational urban actions to generate knowledge and local dynamics*

### Petra Pferdmenges

*Luca School of Arts (Sint-Lucas Architectuur)*

*www.alivearchitecture.eu*

*info@alivearchitecture.eu*

#### Abstract

*This paper reveals how performing<sup>1</sup> generates different types of knowing and how the feedback loop between performing and knowing can stimulate dynamics in a neglected neighborhoods.*

*The types of knowing and the feedback loop are explained through a series of urban actions that I realized in Brussels red light district. On one side the performances may generate dynamics in the area through observing the local knowledge of the population. On the other side the performances create general knowledge that may be applied in different projects or by other designers. Both types of knowledge advocate the application of interactions in space rather than distanced theory or long-term planning investigations as a means to create different types of knowledge. Only the combination of both types of knowledge allows that the short-term performance may generate a long-term change in the affected area.*

#### Keywords

Practice-based research; short-term performance – long-term change; testing; general versus local knowledge; feedback loop.

Within my practice-based research on Alive Architecture I engage with a series of socio-spatial margins through performing with quick and simple means in the urban space of the neighborhoods. The approach is applied to test the potential of future transformations and to observe people's reactions towards the performed project. In case of success the initial intervention is repeated, altered and finally forwarded towards a more permanent project that may be independent of the designer.

Through this paper I will reveal how *performing* can generate *knowing*. Further I will claim that the feedback loop between both has the capacity to stimulate local dynamics in neglected neighborhoods where short-term performance may lead to long-term change.

The paper is based on a series of projects within Brussels red light district that were and are still developed since 2012.

## Flash-Paint, 2012

In the context of the rue d'Aerschot I was performing intuitively, painting flashes on the sidewalk (1) that indicated programs for the vacant spaces in the street. While the painted flashes did not attract any attention from people, myself performing in the space by painting and washing the flashes off<sup>2</sup> did generate encounter with inhabitants and people passing in the area.

The engagement allowed knowing several wishes of the local population. Therefore the intuitional performances 'Flash-Paint' lead to several further urban performances that interpreted what the local population expressed as needs for their street.

In this first case I learned a method to provoke participation of people by performing as myself being involved into the action. This participatory planning tool can be applied anywhere. Anyhow it is especially useful to engage with people in difficult neighborhoods where it is almost impossible to approach people in conventional ways.



Figure 1  
*Two urban performances of painting flashes on sidewalk of the rue d'Aerschot and later in the day washing them off the same afternoon after a visit at the police station.*

## People's Wall , 2012

*I wish for a less grey wall* – a wish expressed by several inhabitants, sex-workers and big sisters<sup>3</sup> was translated into the temporary activation of the wall through an exhibition. The exhibited work were proposed micro-transformations in the street to improve the livability of the space. City-authorities were invited and came while the lunch break, several sex-workers sneaked out of their shopwindows and some passing-by people joined the event and became therefore co-performers. The sidewalk was transformed into an event space for the duration of several hours. Discussions were generated among the different actors and allowed to engage with people for feedbacks.

From this project I learned that short-term performing could be applied as a way of testing long-term changes. The event was a success and is currently developed further within the project 'I love Aerschot' where a projection throughout the summer will animate the grey wall.



Figure 2  
*Activating the grey wall through an exhibition*

## Sweet Flowers, 2012

*'I wish for better clients'* – a wish expressed by several sex workers is a challenging task for a designer. The initial idea to respond to that wish was to curate a person who would sell flowers to potential clients. As it turned out to be impossible to convince any flower seller to spend an afternoon in the street I handed out the flowers myself and became therefore not only the initiator but as well one of the actors in the event.

Even though the event had a short-term value as it changed, temporarily, the street by men holding flowers in their hands and the relation among several men and women, the project did not have the potential to become permanent as it would not be possible without my personal involvement. The extracted knowledge from this performance is that in order to generate long-term change the initial action has to have the potential to be developed further without the interference of the designer.



Figure 3  
*Offering flowers to passing-by people in the street*

## Food for Love, 2012

*'I wish for a restaurant'* – was a wish expressed by most of the sex-workers I engaged with. Therefore I enabled the pop-up restaurant Piadina Wagon to sell their Italian specialties for one day in the street. The restaurant performed beyond the truck itself by expanding their furniture onto the sidewalk. The diversity of clients reached from prostitutes, clients, inhabitants to city authorities who picked-up their lunch in order to see what this project was about. We recognized the socio-economic success of the project and realized that there was potential for pop-up restaurants in the street. The owners of the restaurant agreed to install their truck once per month from June to October 2012.

Dissemination of the project through local media announced the success of the project and one week later a second restaurant with the name Pink Panther arrived to sell Lebanese specialties in the street. While the Piadina Wagon stopped their intervention this November, the Pink Panther continues selling Lebanese food once a week in the street.

On one side the curated performances had a short-term value to improve the livability of the street. On the other side we recognized that there is a potential for pop-up restaurants in the street that may generate a long-term change.

The generated knowledge from this project is the importance of disseminating a successful project through local media in order to generate long-term change through external dynamics in a neighborhood.



Figure 4  
*Enabling the Piadina Wagon to sell their Italian Specialities*



## I love Aerschot, 2013

The performances revealed in the previous chapters attracted the interest of several local authorities and in November 2012 a call for ideas for the street was launched. Together with the winning team l'Escaut and OKUP I am currently developing a calendar of events that will test the potential of long-term projects throughout this summer. In case of success the projects will be developed towards permanent interventions.

To test the potential of mixity in the street and to stimulate the feedback loop between local actors and planners one of the vacant ground floors in the street will be transformed into an onsite laboratory. A local hairdresser will be invited to offer free haircuts to people. Cinema Nova projects movies from the laboratory onto the wall and a local catering service will provide for a candle light dinner. Finally a 'video-maton' will be installed in the laboratory where people can express their reactions related to the realized tests.

The extracted knowledge of this project in process is the importance of informing political authorities about self-initiated projects. Only through involving those who have the power it is possible to gain access to more powerful projects that may have a larger impact onto the livability of the neighborhood.



Figure 5  
*I love Aerschot': urban testing for a better rue d'Aerschot*

## Conclusion

The creation of knowing through performing is realized on two different levels:

1. On one side the performances produces general knowledge that may be applied in other projects and places. Those include:

- Performance as a participatory planning tool through designer's presence
- Performance as testing permanent potential in a quick and simple way
- Design of performances that can be realized without designers involvement
- Dissemination of a successful performance to provoke long-term change
- Involvement of politicians into self-initiated projects for larger impact

2. On the other side the short-term performance raised a local knowledge that may be furthered and generate more permanent interventions in the neighbourhood. Those are:

- Learning about needs of local population as in the performance (Flash Paint)
- Learning if the action has potential to be repeated (Piadina Wagon)
- Recognition of performance's success to be developed further (People's Wall)

What both types of knowledge have in common is that they are created through direct interaction with a specific place and its population rather than through distanced theory or long-term planning investigations. While the expert in design develops the general knowledge through reflection, the local experts generate the knowledge on the potential of a project for a specific site.

Only the combination of both types of knowledge allows entering into the feedback loop between *performing* and *knowing* in order to generation long-term change through short-term performances.

## (Endnotes)

- 1 The specificity of performing is linked to the body being involved into the urban action
- 2 This second, unintended action was encouraged by the police who passed by while I was painting the flashes, not being in possession of an authorization to do so
- 3 'Big sister' is the translation from the original French term 'madame', elderly women who accompany the sex-workers in the 'salon de prostitution'